

Americanism: The Myth and the Reality

The unity¹ achieved by the American hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church in the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore was in one sense very deep and in another very superficial.² There was, to the amazement of American non-Catholics, a remarkable unity in essential doctrine and practice with, at the same time, a notable divergence in the personalities, the national origins and the education of the American hierarchy. The Council itself had been more or less imposed from Rome, although sought by some members of the American hierarchy. The legislation of the Third Plenary Council did not have for its purpose the solution of the peculiar problems of Catholicism in the United States but the reorganization of the hierarchy and the hierarchical institutions in the manner best suited to the purpose of the universal Church.

1. *The Natural Divisions of American Catholicism*

The membership of the Council was symbolic of the natural divisions of American Catholicism. Including Cardinal John McCloskey who was unable to attend the Council, and the

¹ I have treated the subject of Americanism in great detail in my book, *The Great Crisis in American Catholic History, 1895-1900* (New York, 1957).

² The official record of the Council is *Acta et decreta Concilii Plenarii Baltimorensis Tertii* (Baltimore, 1886).

apostolic delegate, Archbishop James Gibbons of Baltimore, the archbishops represented quite well the diverse elements of the hierarchy. Archbishop Elder with Bishop John Spalding represented the original Anglo-American origins of American Catholicism, but archbishops of Irish birth or descent were predominant. There were representatives of French, Spanish, German and Belgian immigrants. The national origins of the bishops showed an even more pronounced Irish predominance and had a better German representation, but had fewer prelates of other nationalities. Those of Irish birth or descent held the more important sees, especially those on the eastern seaboard.

Because most Irishmen spoke the English language from birth, because the American Irish did not think of themselves as foreigners, and because these Irish bishops held the chief sees, they tended to speak for Catholicism in the nation. This had two disquieting effects. As long as the Irish were the spokesmen for the Church in the country, Roman Catholicism was to be regarded by Americans as a foreign religion and that fact in turn was not pleasing to those of English descent and to those of other nationalities, especially to the German Catholics who had become very numerous in the dioceses of the near Middle West. In a sense the Third Plenary Council, by settling for the immediate future the Romanization of American Catholic canonical organization and practice, cleared the way for the discussion that followed on how much Americanization would be accepted and who should have the final word in that decision. Across this discussion ran the controversy that seems to exist in the Church at all times, the division between the progressives and the conservatives in the adaptation of the Church to the times. Sometimes these divisions seemed to follow nationalistic lines, sometimes not. Sometimes also the progress of Americanization of the Church seemed to arouse conservative fears, although at other times the conservatives seemed to be stronger American nationalists.

At the conclusion of the Third Plenary Council the nationalizing tendency seemed to be in the ascendancy, especially since

the whole American Church seemed to be bound into the new unity by the regulations of the Council. It seemed quite appropriate that the presiding officer of the Council, Archbishop Gibbons, should be made a cardinal, especially since the first American cardinal, John McCloskey, had died on October 10, 1885. It seemed also appropriate that the first notable fruit of the Council should be the establishment of the first national institution of American Catholicism, Catholic University. There was no great difficulty in obtaining approval of the decrees of the Council since they had been for the most part prearranged by the meeting of the archbishops and bishops in Rome in 1883.

The exact character of Catholic University was not determined in the Council. There was also one other problem postponed for final settlement after the Council, that of the condemnation of certain secret societies which were attracting Catholics to membership in the United States. The question of creating a system of Catholic parochial schools seemed definitely decided, and the relationship between religious orders and the hierarchy was solved by adopting the solution obtained by Cardinal Manning in England. But no solution was offered for the problem of friction between the many nationalities composing the Catholic body in the United States.

2. *Americanization*

Whatever friction there had been in earlier times between the Anglo-American Catholics and the Irish immigrants was not caused by great differences in language between them because Gaelic did not survive even among the Irish who spoke Gaelic before they came. But the Germans, particularly in the Middle West, brought with them not only the German language, but frequently German sisters and brothers and, more importantly, German priests who tried in some measure to re-create the German Catholic communities that they had left behind in Europe. To the Irish particularly the perpetuation of these foreign languages and customs seemed undesirable and a hindrance to the advance of Catholicism in the United States. The German

Catholics who regarded the Irish lightly not only resented this criticism of the Irish and other Americans, but retorted with charges that American culture was permeated with religious liberalism and materialism manifested in easy divorces and ir-religion.

The first notable action of the Germans against Americanization was a petition in 1883 of 82 priests of St. Louis to Rome asking that their national parishes be given full parish rights. The Roman authorities referred the matter back to the Plenary Council, but no action on it was taken there.

When in 1886 Father P. M. Abbelen of Milwaukee presented a petition to the Sacred Congregation asking for full parochial status for the German national churches and that children of the immigrants be sent to these parishes, the American bishops in Rome—John J. Keane of Richmond and John Ireland of St. Paul—objected and the Council of archbishops meeting in Philadelphia sent a protest against the Abbelen petition. The Sacred Congregation of Propaganda rejected the Abbelen petition on June 7, 1887.³

When Archbishop Gibbons, named cardinal on June 7, 1886, went to Rome early in 1887 to complete the ceremonies of his investiture, he was called into conference by the cardinals who were weighing a request by Cardinal Alexandre Taschereau of Quebec that the Knights of Labor be condemned as a secret society. Gibbons pleaded successfully against the condemnation. In some manner, his letter to the Congregation was published in the *New York Herald*, and because the condemnation of the Knights was prevented, Gibbons and Bishops Ireland⁴ and Keane⁵ who had assisted him achieved a reputation as friends of the American workingman.⁶

³ The most sympathetic study of German Catholic immigration is C. Barry, O.S.B., *The Catholic Church and German Americans* (Milwaukee, 1953). Abbelen is treated pp. 62-75.

⁴ J. Moynihan's *The Life of Archbishop John Ireland* (New York, 1953) is an imperfect but friendly study.

⁵ P. Ahern's *The Life of John J. Keane, Educator and Archbishop 1839-1918* (New York, 1935) is the best study of this archbishop.

⁶ Cf. H. Browne, *The Catholic Church and the Knights of Labor* (Washington, 1949), especially pp. 228-312.

Bishop Ireland also emerged as a leading protagonist for Catholic University.⁷ Then, as a leader in efforts to make Catholics accepted by Americans, he also drew upon himself the criticism of the German bishops of Wisconsin. The points of controversy between the progressive members of the hierarchy and the more conservative bishops were civic Americanization, the erection and maintenance of parochial schools, and cooperation with non-Catholics in social reform. In all three, Bishop Ireland became the chief exponent of the progressive or liberal side. In his speech at the Third Plenary Council he had said: "Republic of America. . . . Thou bearest in thy hands the hopes of the human race. Thy mission from God is to show to nations that men are capable of the highest civil and political liberty. Be thou ever free and prosperous. Through thee may liberty triumph over the earth from the rising to the setting sun!—*Esto Perpetua*." ⁸ At Gibbons' golden jubilee he had exclaimed: "I preach the most glorious crusade. Church and Age! Unite them in the name of humanity, in the name of God!" ⁹ A few moments later, he said: "It is the age of democracy. It is an age of liberty, civil and political—the people, tired of the unrestricted sway of sovereigns, have themselves become sovereigns and exercise with more or less directness the power which was primarily theirs by divine ordinance. The age of democracy!" ¹⁰

In his efforts to Americanize the Church, Bishop Ireland had close associates in Cardinal Gibbons and Bishop John J. Keane in this country and an ally in Father Denis O'Connell in Rome. Opposed to him were Archbishop Michael Corrigan of New York, Bishop Bernard McQuaid of Rochester and several German bishops. In 1890, addressing the National Educational Association in its annual meeting held in St. Paul, Ireland, now an archbishop, praised the public school system.¹¹ Then, under his

⁷ D. Reilly, O.C., in *The School Controversy (1890-1893)*, is partisan toward Archbishop Ireland in the school controversy: 2 vol. (New York, 1903-4).

⁸ J. Ireland, *The Church and Modern Society*: I, pp. 64-65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 116-17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 217-32.

direction, the pastors of parochial schools in his diocese at Faribault and Stillwater in 1891 made agreements with public school authorities to turn over their parochial schools during the day and in turn received public funds for the pay of teachers. Archbishop Ireland was subject to new criticism and charged with betraying the Catholic parochial schools even though the contracts were soon cancelled. At the Council of archbishops in St. Louis in November, 1891, Archbishop Ireland explained his action and Cardinal Gibbons sent to Rome a report of the session that was friendly to Archbishop Ireland. But Archbishop Corrigan of New York, with the signatures also of other archbishops, sent in a criticism of Archbishop Ireland's explanation. Archbishop Ireland went to Rome and the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda ruled that his contracts in the Faribault and Stillwater schools "tolerari potest".

3. *Americanism*

On his way back to the United States in 1892, Archbishop Ireland spoke in Paris under the auspices of those who were supporting the *ralliement* to the Third Republic, praising the co-operation between the Church and democratic institutions in the United States.¹² In a second speech to the younger clergy of Paris, he urged them to get out of their sacristies and work with the people. In 1894, Abbé Félix Klein of the Institut Catholique translated several of the archbishop's American speeches into French and published them as a book.¹³

(a) *The Reality*. Certain documents and maps dealing with Columbus were sought from the Vatican Library for the World's Fair in Chicago. Pope Leo XIII agreed and decided also to send a papal legate with the documents. The legate chosen was Archbishop Francesco Satolli who had defended Archbishop Ireland in the controversy over the schools. The legate came under the guidance of Monsignor Denis O'Connell and after attending the

¹² For Archbishop Ireland's visit to France, cf. McAvoy, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-107.

¹³ J. Ireland and Abbé Klein, eds., *L'Eglise et le Siècle* (Paris, 1894).

opening ceremonies of the Chicago Exposition went for a visit with Archbishop Ireland in St. Paul. He went also to the annual Council of the archbishops in New York on November 16, and presented two proposals: a fourteen-point program for schools which seemed to approve what Archbishop Ireland had done in his archdiocese, and a proposal that there be an apostolic delegation established in Washington for the United States. The archbishops rejected both proposals. On the Satolli proposal for the schools there were so many bishops who wrote protests to Pope Leo that the pope sent a letter the following May insisting that Satolli had been misunderstood and that the decrees of the Third Plenary Council on schools were still in force. On the proposal about the delegation, while Cardinal Gibbons in the name of the hierarchy was preparing a letter rejecting the proposal, Archbishop Satolli released a letter of the pope on January 14, 1893, establishing the apostolic delegation with himself as first delegate.¹⁴

The delegate had taken up his residence at Catholic University where he was the guest of Bishop John J. Keane, a close friend of Ireland. Further, Archbishop Corrigan had refused to have anything to do with the delegate and was accused of fostering certain attacks on the delegate appearing in the press. Cardinal Gibbons, at the suggestion of Cardinal Rampolla, intervened and brought about a friendly meeting between the apostolic delegate and Archbishop Corrigan in New York in the summer of 1893. Yet, the delegate attended the Catholic Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in September in the company of Archbishop Ireland and gave high praise in his speech to the American Constitution.¹⁵ The delegate refused, however, to have anything to do with the Catholic participation in the Parliament of Religions held about the same time at the World's Fair. Bishop Keane was the chief Catholic representative in the Parliament although

¹⁴ The story of the apostolic delegation is told in J. Ellis' *The Life of James Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop of Baltimore 1834-1921*: 2 vols. (Milwaukee, 1954), I, pp. 595-652.

¹⁵ *Loyalty to Church and State, The Mind of His Eminence, Francis Cardinal Satolli* (Baltimore, 1895), p. 150.

several other Catholics, including Cardinal Gibbons, were on the program. Keane later wrote letters and newspaper articles in defense of his participation in the Parliament, but some other Catholic writers were very critical of the Catholic participation.

On June 20, 1894, the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office issued a new decree banning Catholic membership in secret societies, mentioning especially the Odd Fellows, the Sons of Temperance and the Knights of Pythias. The conservatives, especially Bishops McQuaid of Rochester and Silas Chatard of Indianapolis and the German bishops of Milwaukee, wanted the condemnation, but Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop Ireland and their friends asked the delegate not to announce the new decree and wrote to Rome to have it suspended. The Council of archbishops meeting in Philadelphia in October decided not to issue the decree, but some bishops had already announced it. Then, Cardinal Rampolla, on November 24, sent Cardinal Gibbons word that the decree should be published. That summer also, Father William Tappert from Kentucky had attacked the Catholic participation in the Parliament of Religions in a public Catholic meeting in Cologne. At the Third International Catholic Scientific Congress in Brussels in September, Keane had defended his participation and that of other Catholics, claiming that it had been an occasion of good. In Paris there arose a movement to hold a similar parliament in connection with the Paris World's Fair in 1900, but the plans were so liberal that the Cardinal-Archbishop of Paris disapproved the plan.

In May, 1895, Monsignor Denis O'Connell was forced to resign from the rectorship of North American College, apparently because of his partisanship for the liberal bishops. Cardinal Gibbons made him rector of his titular church so that he could stay in Rome and be of service there. On April 25, 1895, Archbishop Satolli attended the laying of the cornerstone of a church in a German congregation in Pottsville, Pennsylvania, and gave strong praise to the German Catholics of the country. This was a change of position on his part. Then, on August 12, he asked the pope for a letter condemning parliaments of religion. The

papal letter was dated September 15. It caught Archbishop Ireland by surprise and at first he denied that it had any importance in American activities. It did kill the movement for a parliament at the Paris Exposition of 1900. In Rome in the *Civiltà Cattolica*,¹⁶ a chronicle of events in the United States said that the liberals had received two checks, the condemnation of secret societies and the prohibition of parliaments of religion. The article accused the Americanizers of a kind of Pelagianism and of separatism.

On January 5, 1896, Archbishop Satolli was named to be a cardinal. In September, 1896, Bishop John J. Keane was removed from the rectorship of Catholic University. In the *Ecclesiastical Review* of February, 1897, there appeared an article, "The Chapter 'De Fide Catholica' in the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore," accusing the progressives of liberalism. On March 28, Ireland answered his critics from the pulpit of St. Patrick's Church in Washington, calling his opponents "refractaires" and accused them of being opposed to the ideas of Pope Leo XIII. He insisted that the divisions in the American Church were not over nationalities, but were over fidelity to the pope's wishes.¹⁷ Monsignor Joseph Schroeder of Catholic University answered him in the German Catholic paper of Pittsburgh, accusing the progressives of the condemned liberalism of the Syllabus of Errors. The story of the dismissal of Keane had been told in Paris in *La Verité* by a friend of Schroeder, Abbé Georges Périès, a discharged professor of canon law from Catholic University, who repeated rumors that Ireland was to be called to Rome. Cardinal Rampolla eventually was forced to issue a denial of the story.

In the spring of 1897, Count Guillaume de Chabrol, an active leader in the *ralliement* movement in France, decided to publish a translation of the biography of Father Isaac Hecker (1819-1888), the convert founder of the Congregation of St. Paul. Chabrol saw the biography as a usable tool in his campaign for

¹⁶ XLVIII (4 Gennaio, 1896), pp. 118-24.

¹⁷ The sermon was printed in *Freeman's Journal*, April 3, 1897.

the *ralliement*. He approached young Abbé Félix Klein to smooth out the translation and prepare it for a French audience.¹⁸ Abbé Klein shortened and improved the translation and wrote for it a vigorous preface in which he spoke of Father Hecker as an example of the priest of the future, a self-made man, a doctor of the spiritual life who understood that the modern man needed greater freedom. Hecker, he said, had insisted on more dependence on the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, on active rather than passive virtue, and desired to abolish the barriers that kept out the modern unbelievers from the Church. Chabrol and Klein arranged for a campaign of publicity to be given to the translation in the French press. Within a few weeks, the book went into three printings.

In Rome, O'Connell planned to translate the biography of Hecker into Italian, but when he was invited to give a paper at the Fourth International Scientific Congress at Fribourg from August 16 to 20, he wrote his paper on Father Hecker, making his idea of religious Americanism the chief theme in Hecker's life. He entitled his paper "A New Idea in the Life of Father Hecker". He distinguished between two kinds of Americanism. The political kind as found in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, he maintained, was fully consonant with Catholic doctrines. The other was ecclesiastical Americanism. The ideal relation between Church and State was union but that was the thesis which in practice was not possible; the hypothesis or practical solution was the freedom enjoyed by the Church in the United States. Hecker had accepted both Americanisms. Bishop Charles Turinaz of Nancy, a conservative, attacked O'Connell's paper and insisted that Hecker's ideas were really Protestant. He was answered by Klein who claimed that Turinaz had misinterpreted Hecker.

On November 7, 1897, a Jesuit, Father Coube, speaking at

¹⁸ The French translation was *Le Père Hecker Fondateur des "Paulistes" Américains, 1819-1888*, par le Père W. Elliott, de la même Compagnie. Traduit et adapté de l'anglais avec autorization de l'auteur. Introduction par Mgr. Ireland. Préface par L'Abbé Félix Klein (Paris, 1897).

St. Sulpice, spoke of the four great evils that now threatened the Church: the Parliament of Religions, an article by Brunetière in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Maurice Blondel's philosophy, and Father Hecker's Americanism. The following Sunday another Jesuit, Father Gaudeau, launched a similar attack on these evils. The term "Americanism" was now definitely attached to the movement but there were differences of opinion as to what the term signified. O'Connell's paper was printed in pamphlet form in both English and French and appeared in *La Quinzaine*.

There began to appear on March 3, 1898, in *La Verité*, a series of articles signed "Martel," who was Abbé Charles Maignen, a priest of the Society of the Brothers of Saint Vincent de Paul. The title of the first indicated the purpose of the series: "L'Américanisme Mystique." The articles examined critically the life of Father Hecker. Maignen accused Hecker of trying to make easy the approach of rationalists to the Church. He sneered at Hecker's preference for Anglo-Saxons and for democracy. In later articles, "Martel" attacked Monsignor O'Connell's paper at Fribourg and Keane's defense of the Parliament of Religion at Malines. Eventually, he called the biography of Hecker the symbol of a new school of theology, which he called "Americanism". He elaborated a plot of the Americanists against the Church in which the Parliament of Religions and the efforts to hold another in Paris were basic elements.

In May the essays were gathered in book form under the title, *Le Père Hecker est-il un Saint?*¹⁹ When Cardinal Richard refused an imprimatur, a Roman publisher was obtained and the imprimatur secured from Père Albert Lepidi, O.P., the Master of the Sacred Palace. Superficially it seemed to have papal approval.

Maignen summed up the errors of Hecker: a belief in a natural aspiration to supernatural good; a distinction between the active and passive virtues; a wrong notion about the activity of the Holy Spirit; the elimination of the "customs house" for converts; an ignoring of the distinctions between precepts and counsels and opposing the religious life; a wrong notion of the spiritual life in

¹⁹ *Études sur l'Américanisme Le Père Hecker est-il un Saint?*

his discussions of Latins and Anglo-Saxons; his advocating with Archbishop Ireland the separation of Church and State. Emphasizing the talk about Latins and Anglo-Saxons, the United States went to war with Spain on April 25 over Cuba. At the request of Cardinal Rampolla, Archbishop Ireland had tried to prevent the Spanish-American War, but his intervention came too late.

Maignen's book contained some new essays in which the Americanists were accused of certain liberalist doctrines in connection with Keane's speeches at the Parliament of Religions and an article by a "Romanus" in the *Contemporary Review*. Keane wrote to Rampolla, protesting the imprimatur given to Maignen's book. He also wrote an article in *Catholic World*, stating that his liberal ideas were the principles of Pope Leo. Americanism, he said, was just the sentiment of an American Catholic toward his country and had nothing to do with the ideas expressed in the book of Maignen.

Ireland complained to Rampolla that Maignen and Périès were defining Americanism in terms of French apostates and not in the words of real Americans. A move was made to put the French biography on the Index of Prohibited Books. In *La Verité* appeared some letters of Monsignor O'Connell distinguishing true Americanism and false Americanism. It was rumored that the pope had stopped the effort to put the biography on the Index and had appointed a commission of cardinals to examine the question of Americanism. Archbishop Ireland went to Rome and Cardinal Gibbons sent a letter protesting any papal action against Americanism. On February 7, Gibbons received a cablegram that his protest had come too late and Archbishop Ireland, arriving in Rome on January 31, was told that the letter against Americanism was already in the mails.

(b) *The Myth*. In his Apostolic Letter *Testem benevolentiae*,²⁰ the pope did not say that anyone held the reprobated doctrines which had been discussed in connection with the translation of the biography of Father Hecker. The doctrines of this Ameri-

²⁰ *American Ecclesiastical Review* XX (April, 1899), pp. 399-409.

canism were: that the Church should show indulgence to others in matters of doctrine and discipline; that external spiritual guidance was now superfluous because of a new abundance of the grace of the Holy Spirit; that natural virtues were better suited than supernatural virtues to the present day; that passive virtues were better in a former day but the active virtues were proper for the present times; that among the passive virtues those associated with the religious life were less well suited for the present day; that new ways should be adopted for bringing converts into the Church. But the pope added that the Americanism he reprobated did not include the characteristic qualities of the American people.

Archbishop Ireland and Archbishop Keane immediately insisted that they did not hold the condemned doctrines. The conservative opponents of Ireland, Archbishop Corrigan and Archbishop Messmer, thanked the pope for preserving the American Church from peril. But Cardinal Gibbons in his answer stated that no educated American Catholic held the condemned doctrines. Archbishop Ireland insisted that the pope had accepted his denial of the existence of the heresy and Cardinal Gibbons' answer was accepted in Rome, although it was never published in the cardinal's lifetime. The Americanism condemned in the papal document did have some resemblances to the theories and practices of the Americanism of Archbishop Ireland, Archbishop Keane, and Monsignor O'Connell, but the European Americanism was created by Maignen and expanded with statements of certain apostates and unnamed liberal Catholics of Europe. There was a third Americanism which was expressly exempted by the pope and that was the proper devotion of Americans to the American way of life and the American form of government.

The papal letter *Testem benevolentiae* ended any heretical Americanism, either European or American. When the chief Americanists, Archbishops Ireland and Keane, Monsignor O'Connell, Abbé Klein and the Paulists denied that they held the doctrines which the pontiff had condemned, Maignen did not reassert the existence of the heresy. Americanization, the bone

of contention in the United States, was not involved in the papal document. Abbé Klein in his autobiography called Americanism a "phantom heresy" and as it was described in the papal letter it was held by no one. The argument for political *ralliement* based on the progress of the Church in the democratic United States was indeed quieted, but that argument had little importance in the United States. Archbishop Ireland openly insisted that the real Americanism had not been touched by the papal letter, and before he left Europe in 1899 he explained to the press that the condemned Americanism was the creation of Abbés Périès and Maignen and had never really existed.

The major conflict within the United States during the European arguments over Americanism—the Americanization of Catholicism—was only accidentally touched by the papal letter. In the United States and in France the pontiff achieved his purpose in stopping the public controversy, but he did not really take sides in the bitter controversy over Americanization. The letter pleased the conservatives to some extent and wounded the progressives by uniting the word "Americanism" with reprobated doctrines; yet by exempting political Americanism from his criticism the pontiff had deprived the conservatives of victory and gave the Americanists a basis for saying that they had not been touched. The adaptation of Catholicism to the American milieu, which was the basic subject of the controversy in the United States, passed from a critical problem to a major source of friction between the same groups. Eventually, the followers of Archbishop Ireland were to triumph in the next two decades. In the failure of the conservatives' American Federation of Catholic Societies²¹ and the temporary Roman suppression of the National Catholic Welfare Council in 1922 were evidences that the bitter feelings of the Americanist crisis were not yet dead even as late as the third decade of the 20th century.

²¹ The strange story of this attempt by conservatives has been told in the unpublished thesis of Sister M. Gorman, "Federation of Catholic Societies in the United States, 1870-1920" (Notre Dame, 1962).